

**Written Testimony of Generations United
1331 H St. NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC 20005**

**House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources Hearing:
Letting Kids Be Kids: Balancing Safety with Opportunity for Foster Youth
Thursday, May 9th, 2013**

Generations United's is the national membership organization focused on improving the lives of children, youth and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs and public policies. We act as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration among aging, children and youth organizations, providing a forum to explore common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation. Generations United's National Center on Grandfamilies works to enact policies and promote programs to help grandfamilies, families headed by grandparents or other relatives who share their homes with grandchildren, nieces, nephews or other related children. This testimony will focus on ways to support children in Grandfamilies, also known as Kinship Families.

Background on Grandfamilies/Kinship Care

Approximately 2.7 million children (4 percent of all children) in the United States are raised in grandfamilies or kinship care without the presence of their parents. This includes families where children are cared for full time by blood relatives or other adults with whom they have a family-like relationship such as godparents or close family friends.ⁱ This represents an 18 percent increase over the past decade.

Grandfamilies are found inside and outside of the child welfare system. Children who are placed with relatives in foster care account for over a quarter (26 percent) of all children in the foster care system. For every child being raised by relatives in the foster care system, nearly 25 children are being raised by relatives outside of the system with no parent present in the home. Those grandfamilies that keep children out of foster care save taxpayers more than \$6.5 billion each year.ⁱⁱ

Grandparents or other relatives often take on the care of children with little or no chance to plan in advance. Consequently, they frequently face unique challenges including arranging legal custody, addressing the children's education needs, accessing affordable housing, ensuring financial stability, and obtaining adequate health care for the children and themselves.

More than 2.7 million grandparents report they are responsible for their grandchildren's basic needs, and over one in five of these grandparents lives below the poverty line.ⁱⁱⁱ Approximately 60 percent are still in the workforce.^{iv} Adding to the stress, grandparents often care for the children for extended period of time; 36 percent report that they have been responsible for the children for more than five years.^v Research shows that, despite the need, relative caregivers are not accessing the benefits that are available to them. Less than 12% of grandfamilies receive TANF even though nearly 100% of children in these families are eligible. Less than half

(42%) of low-income grandfamilies receive Medicaid or SNAP despite food insecurity and need. Only 17% of low income working grandfamily caregivers receive child care assistance. Only 15% percent of low income grandfamily caregivers receive housing assistance.^{vi}

Despite these challenges, research shows that children placed with relatives are just as safe or safer when compared with children placed with unrelated foster families. They have more stability, experience fewer placements, are more likely to maintain sibling connections and preserve cultural heritage.^{vii} In short, relative placements offer home that “let’s kids be kids,” providing safe environments while nurturing healthy connections and opportunities.

Kinship Navigator Programs

Kinship Navigator Programs, one of the Family Connection Grant types authorized through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, help connect children in grandfamilies to critical supports to help them thrive. Because the vast majority of children in these families are not part of the formal foster care system, many are not connected to basic benefits and supports. An informal survey found of the most common types of services referred through navigator programs are food stamps (SNAP) and food pantry visits, child care, health care, counseling for children, clothing for children, and legal services. Programs also report frequent referrals for respite care, housing and caregiver training. Kinship Navigator Programs are family focused and voluntary. They generally operate on a model that empowers families to identify needs, barriers and supports. Families that may view the child welfare system as a threat and hesitate to reach out for help are more often more comfortable with navigators and willing to access them for assistance.

Evaluations of the first grants authorized in 2008 demonstrate important preliminary outcome information on child well-being and demonstrate improvements in coordination and efficiency of child welfare and other relevant services. Navigator programs have improved partnerships and collaboration between the public child welfare system and private agencies leading caseworkers to consult on a range of casework issues as a result of relationships formed through the navigator. Programs have filled in gaps in services resulting from cuts in state and local child welfare agencies operating under tight budgets. In particular navigators have helped with prevention services and in serving those families diverted from the formal child welfare system. Navigators have elevated awareness of the needs of kinship families in communities prompting agencies and communities to explore creative ways to address the challenges these families face. The evaluation requirement in the federal grant prompted the first outside evaluation for several agencies service kinship families. As a result both new and well-established programs are integrating new feedback to improve their quality and efficiency.

Preliminary child well-being indicators show that children in families who received support from the navigators experienced increased permanency and stability, demonstrating fewer days in child welfare custody and lower rates of foster care re-entry. Multiple programs reported high satisfaction with services and less intense family needs after intervention and at the point of follow up. Some demonstrated increased caregiver strengths from baseline and reduced

behavioral problems of children and youth at case closing. At least one program demonstrated improved safety.

Recommendations:

Extend the authorization of Family Connections Grants:

Additional years of support for the Family Connection Grants will provide adequate time to secure more complete evaluation results that can be applied to existing programs for adaptation and improvement. These results will be useful in informing both programs receiving federally funds and those pieced together with other resources that have not been able to prioritize evaluation. The timing of the first grants created some challenges to sustainability since many began in the midst of the rapid economic downturn. Programs are now planning more effectively for the current economic climate with greater promise of sustainability. At the same time, federal support is vitally important during this period where many child welfare programs are facing cuts to critical services.

Lower the Floor on the Kinship Navigator Grant Amount:

Smaller communities and rural areas report difficulty meeting the matching requirement for such large grants. Many of these communities have developed proposals to effectively serve their communities with smaller grant amounts and would be able to meet matching requirements if smaller grants were available. Lowering the minimum grant amount would make these grants accessible to more rural and under-resourced communities.

Consider Allowing Universities and Other Institutions to Apply for Family Connections/Kinship Navigator Grants:

Some rural areas report lacking large enough non-profits or other institutions to support applications for the grants. Cooperative Extension Services at universities often play a critical role in these communities and would be the most effective deliverer of services but they are not eligible to apply under current law.

Encourage use of combined Family Connections Grant strategies:

Family Connections Grants offer states and communities the ability to use a combination of the four grant strategies to meet needs. Initial reports suggest Kinship Navigator Programs and other grants are especially beneficial to families when used as part of a comprehensive approach to benefit families. Future grants should promote comprehensive approaches to meeting grandfamilies needs through encouraging combined strategies of existing grant types and/or offering additional demonstration models.

Encourage state licensing procedures that focus on core safety standards without placing necessary barriers on relative caregivers:

A comprehensive review of foster care licensing standards in all fifty states and the District of Columbia conducted by Generations United and the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law revealed that some states had developed problematic licensing standards that are not necessarily associated with safety for the child and may propose barriers to foster

care licensure for relative caregivers. Examples may include requiring all applicants be no older than 65, have a high school degree or pay for a physical exam for each member of the household. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 clarifies that states may waive non-safety licensing standards on a case-by-case basis in order to eliminate barriers to placing children safely with relatives in licensed homes. However the process to seek these waivers in some states and localities may be perceived to be too difficult or cumbersome to successfully attain them. In many cases caseworkers or caregivers seeking to be licensed may not be aware of the availability of waivers. As a result the process may not be initiated even when it is in the best interest of the child. Generations United recommends the Department of Health and Human Services continue to support state's flexibility in licensing standards but encourages the development and implementation of a cord set of model standards that increase the likelihood of children being placed safely with relatives in licensed foster homes.

Highlight and Promote State implementation of Guardianship Assistance Programs:

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 established the federal Title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program, referred to in this report as "GAP." GAP is the first time that federal dollars were made available exclusively for supporting children exiting foster care to permanent homes with relative guardians. Since implementation at least 29 states, the District of Columbia and one Indian Tribe have been approved by the Department of Health and Human Services for federal funding from the new Title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program. These states are demonstrating ways in which these programs help "let kids be kids" by removing barriers to "normalcy" children often experience in traditional licensed foster homes. Specifically guardianship assistance programs benefit individual children by:

- Promoting a sense of belonging; helping children stay connected to family and to their culture
- Increasing stability and continuity
- Preventing children from remaining in foster care when reunification and adoption are not appropriate permanency options
- Reducing agency supervision and intervention in children's lives once they are in a permanent family
- Not requiring the termination of parental rights for children who have and want to preserve relationships with parents who cannot care for them
- Provides relatives with assistance to care permanently for children

The Department of Health and Human Services should highlight the benefits and encourage additional states to implement Guardianship Assistance Programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer written testimony for this important hearing. Please direct questions regarding these recommendations to Jaia Peterson Lent, Generations United's Deputy Executive Director, at jlent@gu.org or 202-289-3979.

ⁱ Stepping Up for Kids: What government and communities should do to support kinship families. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012). This data includes family where the children's parents are not present. In addition there are significant numbers of children cared for by relatives in multigenerational homes where the children's parent may live in the home, but are not providing regular care for their children for a range of reasons such as mental illness, substance abuse, or teen parenting.

ⁱⁱ Generations United calculated this figure based on the federal share of 2000 average monthly foster care maintenance payment of 1 million children. The green book of the Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives estimates the cost at \$545 per child. This is approximately half of the children being raised in grandfamilies outside of the formal foster care system. Half the children are used for our calculation, due to a conservative estimate that the other half already receives some type of government financial assistance, such as a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families TANF child-only grant. Consequently, the cost of one million children entering the system would represent all new financial outlays for taxpayers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Children's Defense Fund. "The State of America's Children Handbook (2012)." Accessed 20 August 2012 at < <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/soac-2012-handbook.pdf>>

^{iv} ibid

^v ibid

^{vi} Stepping Up for Kids: What government and communities should do to support kinship families. Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012).

^{vii} Time for Reform: Support Relatives in Providing Foster Care and Permanent Families for Children. Children and Family Research Center: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now, Generations United. 2007.